

ABLE WAS I ERE I SAW YREKA BAKERY

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Editor's Note: The following appeared in the Sacramento Bee of June 10 1973, and was sent in by the late R. Robinson Rowe.

Husband and Wife were en route to Oregon on a vacation trip. Husband crouched over the wheel, Wife sitting beside him in the family automobile.

"Why don't you say something?" Wife demanded irritably. "You just sit there, mile after mile, without saying a word."

"What do you want, a song and dance, the soft-shoe routine?" Husband demanded. "This freeway driving requires all my concentration."

"I read some place that people who are not so smart make the best drivers," said Wife. "You see, driving is a challenge to them and because they're not very smart they have to give it their all. Smart people find driving boring and they are liable not to concentrate."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Husband.

"That you should be smart enough to be able to drive and talk to me too. Go on, say something."

Husband frowned and looked at his watch. "At this rate we, uh, should reach Ashland about, uh, four thirty."

"You can do better than that," said Wife.

A roadside sign read "Yreka 5."

"Uh, we're almost to Yreka, which is famous for its palindrome Yreka Bakery," said Husband.

"What on earth are you talking about?" asked Wife.

"Palindromes, of which Yreka Bakery is an excellent example."

"What is a palindrome?"

"A palindrome, my dear, is a word, or even a sentence, for that matter, that reads the same backward or forward. Gag, noon, peep and radar are palindromes. So are names like Otto, Hannah, Eve and Ada. The word palindrome comes from the Greek palindromos which means running back again."

"My, you're a veritable fountain of knowledge," said Wife. "Did you say there are sentences that are palindromes?"

"Oh, sure. 'Madam, I'm Adam' is a good example. And Napoleon is credited with 'Able was I ere I saw Elba.'"

"Napoleon was a Frenchman," said Wife. "I doubt he spoke English, at least not well enough to invent English palindromes."

"Maybe so," said Husband. "My favorite is 'Lewd did I live & evil I did dwell' although you have to fudge a little by using the ampersand and dropping the last I in dwell."

"What's the bit about Yreka Bakery?" asked Wife. "It doesn't read the same..."

"...Yes it does," said Husband. "I saw a picture of the glass door of the bakery once and the name Yreka Bakery read the same from both sides."

"Let's stop and see it," said Wife.

"Let's not," said Husband, who hates to stop while driving.

"Let's stop," insisted Wife. "I want to take a picture of it. It would make a cute picture."

They left the freeway on a Yreka offramp and drove into the first service station they saw.

"Can you tell us where the palindrome is, please?" Wife asked the attendant, a young man in his early twenties.

"The Yreka Bak..." began Husband, but the attendant told Wife, "Sure, go three blocks that way, turn right, next left and it's on your right."

They followed the instructions and came to a school. Wife insisted they return to the service station. "That's not the palindrome," she said to the attendant, "that's a school."

"That's right," said the attendant. "And the only one in town with a palindrome."

"Are you sure you know what a palindrome is?" Wife asked.

"Sure, I'm sure, lady. That's a fancy name for a football stadium."

"Not quite," smiled Wife. "A palindrome is a word or sentence, well, like 'Madam, I'm Adam.'"

"You're who?" asked the attendant.

"Just a minute," interrupted Husband. "What we're really looking for is the Yreka Bakery."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" asked the attendant. "Why ask me where the palladium is?"

"You see, Yreka Bakery is a palindrome," explained Wife.

"I told you where that is," said the attendant.

"Please," interrupted Husband again. "Can you tell us where the Yreka Bakery is?"

"No," said the attendant.

"You can't?" exclaimed Wife. "Why not?"

"Because I don't know. I never heard of it."

Neither had the attendants in half a dozen other service stations. Wife finally spotted a very old man, walking slowly down the street with the aid of a cane. Husband stopped the car and they got out. "Pardon me, sir," said Wife. "Could you please tell me where the Yreka Bakery is?"

"The Yreka Bakery?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it closed up years ago."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Wife. "That's too bad. I wanted to get a picture of the palindrome."

"The what?" asked the old man.

"The palindrome."

"That's what I thought you said. What's a palindrome?"

"Well, it's like 'Lewd did I live ere I saw Elba.'"

"You don't say," said the old man.

"She means 'Able was I ere I saw Elba,'" explained Husband.

"Well, I've lived here all my life and as far as I know it was just bakery," said the old man. "None of that sort of lewd talk at all, that I ever heard. But then I could be all wrong."

"No, no," said Wife. "'Lewd did I live ampersand evil I did dwell with one I' is the palindrome, it had nothing to do with the Yreka Bakery, well I mean..."

"But you said you wanted to take a picture of the palindrome," insisted the old man.

"Thank you, sir, for your trouble, said Husband, seizing Wife firmly by the arm and steering her toward the car. "Madam," he said, "just as sure as I'm Adam if you don't forget the whole business, so help me I'll..."

They headed back to the freeway. "That's too bad," said Wife. "I have a feeling I'll never get a picture of a palindrome."

"I'm sorry I ever mentioned it," said Husband. "Those people in Yreka must think we're a couple of nuts!"

"If they do it's all your fault," said Wife, "you wouldn't let me explain."